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World Chronicle

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GUEST: **Mohamed OUMMIH**
President
United Nations Staff Committee

JOURNALISTS: Ted Morello, *Far Eastern Economic Review*

Bhaskar Menon, *The Times of India*

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UN STAFF COMMITTEE

MOHAMED OUMMIH, President of the United Nations Staff Committee, discusses the relationship between the staff of the world organization and the administration. The Staff Council is not a trade union with bargaining powers, but rather a consultative body. The United Nations should offer better working conditions and benefits in order to attract the most highly qualified staff. Disparity between the Professional staff and General Service should be eliminated. Mr. Oummih emphasizes that neither the Staff Rules nor the Staff Council condone any abuse or fraud in the Organization.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

In today's rapidly changing world, the United Nations is playing an increasingly complex and important role. The global organization is involved in almost every part of the world, from peace-keeping and conflict resolution to humanitarian and disaster relief. The work of the world body and its specialized agencies is carried out by tens of thousands of staff who are often called upon to undertake long, arduous and sometimes dangerous missions. Some of them have lost their lives in the service of the Organization, while many others have been detained or jailed in a number of countries.

Our guest today has a special interest in the issue of the United Nations staff. He is Mohamed Oummih, President of the United Nations Staff Committee.

Joining me to talk with Mr. Oummih are Ted Morello of the Far Eastern Economic Review and Bhaskar Menon of *The Times of India*. Mr. Oummih, welcome to World Chronicle.

OUMMIH: Thank you.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Oummih, you are the President of the Staff Union and the President of the Staff Committee, which I gather is sort of the executive arm of the Staff Union. Now, tell me, is the Staff Union a union, a labour union in the accepted sense of the term? I mean, do you negotiate with management on salaries, benefits, working conditions, et cetera, et cetera, as labour unions do in many industrialized countries?

OUMMIH: No, not at all. We have a constitution, and our constitution is basically based on the Staff Rules and Regulations of the United Nations. We are not a union in the sense that is known for a union outside; we are a union inside a union. Basically we have the right for consultation with our management, with our Organization, with the Secretary-General as the head, as the chief administrative officer. So, in that sense, we do not have the same right, if I may say so, as a union outside.

LITTLEJOHNS: Could you call a strike, for example?

OUMMIH: Well, no, I would not. At least, I would not. I think there is a change of philosophy. My philosophy has been and will continue to be that there is no difference between management and staff. We are all staff, and we are all together on the same boat. And therefore we are bound to find solutions to our differences, because as anybody can guess, we do have differences of opinion and views. So in that sense, no, I would not call a strike.

MORELLO: Mr. Oummih, Mike mentioned tens of thousands of members of the United Nations. Do you represent them all? And, incidentally, does that include the peace-keeping troops?

OUMMIH: A very good question. The United Nations Staff Union in New York, we have about 7,000 here, and we do have about 3,000 in the field. I just came back from a trip to peace-keeping missions, and in those areas committees have been established and do belong to New York, so we do have about 3,000 or 4,000 other staff members in peace-keeping missions that belong to New York. At the same time, I should say that I am also the First Vice President of the federation, the Coordinating Committee[1] of --

LITTLEJOHNS: Federation of what?

OUMMIH: Federation of staff members.

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean all the agencies, and so on.

OUMMIH: Right. And as a federation, we do represent more than 25,000 staff members.

MENON: Mohamed, how long have you been a staff member of the UN?

OUMMIH: I will be celebrating my 20th anniversary, if I may say so, in January.

MENON: So you know the Organization is looking forward to its fiftieth anniversary this year. So when you look at this prospect of the fiftieth, celebrating the fiftieth anniversary, and looking back on your 20 years in the Organization, do you think the UN staff are in any way in a mood to celebrate?

OUMMIH: I was expecting this question from you, Mr. Menon. To tell you the truth, I think the conditions, the working conditions of staff in the United Nations have degraded over the years. The Organization is not as competitive as it was 20 years ago. Even the conditions of travel have changed. As you know, travel has been restricted, just to give an example. The salaries have been frozen for a long time. So if we were to think only about ourselves as a staff, I don't think we really would be in a mood, or we are in a mood of celebration. However, we do not think of ourselves just as individuals, but we feel part of the overall ideals of the United Nations, and in that sense, yes, we will be celebrating. Because we feel that the United Nations has done so much for the world, and will be doing so in the next 50 years.

MENON: But in the last few years, or the last year, 56 to 60 staff members have been killed in the line of duty, and not one person has been prosecuted for it. How can you --

LITTLEJOHNS: You can't blame the UN for that.

MENON: No, what I'm saying is that if the UN is respected, if its ideals are respected, why is this happening?

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[1] Coordinating Committee of International Staff Union Associations.

OUMMIH: Well, this is happening -- the figures, first of all, are higher than that.

MENON: It's more than that.

OUMMIH: We've lost about 86 in the last two years. And --

LITTLEJOHNS: Basically involved in peace-keeping operations?

OUMMIH: In peace-keeping operations, yes. I don't think we can blame the Organization for such things.

MENON: No, I'm not blaming the Organization. You said you were celebrating the ideals of the Organization.

OUMMIH: The ideals, yes. You see, anywhere we go, and especially as we were introduced here, we are now working in a not-so-friendly environment, and we accept that, we take the risk, we are willing to go anywhere to serve the Organization. As I said the other day to the Fifth Committee, what we would like to see is that the Organization also does something for us, and that means give the staff the career opportunities that they deserve, give the staff the protection that they deserve. And here I would like to go back to the press conference that I held about a month ago, a month and a half, where I called on Member States to approve a revised draft for the protection of staff serving --

MENON: You're talking about the Convention[2] --

OUMMIH: The Convention, yes.

MENON: -- on the protection of....

OUMMIH: So, it's a good start, but it did not go as far as we would have liked it.

MORELLO: You were complaining, I believe, at one point about the fact that the civilian staff didn't have the same protection as the troop staff -- not only protection, but the benefits derived from it.

OUMMIH: Right.

MORELLO: I think at one point, I don't know what the figures are now, but at one point it was out of, I believe, 49 killed -- and I assume this was both troops and civilians?

OUMMIH: No, only civilians.

MORELLO: Only civilians?

OUMMIH: Only civilians, yes.

MORELLO: In any case, only seven of them were entitled to the benefits.

OUMMIH: Yes. And one of the weaknesses of the draft convention is that in order for a country to call for extradition of someone who had harmed a United Nations staff member, that operation should have been approved only by the Security Council. And as we know, staff go anywhere they are told to go, whether the operation is approved by the Security

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[2] Convention on the Safety of United Nations and Associated Personnel.

Council, the General Assembly, by the Secretary-General himself, et cetera. And that would create in certain situations a climate of insecurity which we don't need. When we serve in those areas, we are already taking so much risk.

MORELLO: How can that be justified, since the troops have the protection of their guns, their APCs and their flak jackets, whereas the civilians have nothing?

OUMMIH: Justified politically? Justified, yes. Some countries are so eager to protect their national interests, so to speak, at least the way they put it forward, in a sense, that they say, well, I'm not going to be responsible for all the peace-keeping or all the staff that I may have in my territory, because then my justice system would be crowded, then I would spend too much money doing so, et cetera. So it's --

MENON: Quite apart from the peace-keeping forces, I think during the last couple of sessions of the General Assembly it's become quite clear that the Member States do not believe in spending any money on UN staff. Repeatedly, requests for training funds, for planning funds, have been turned down. Does this give you any kind of message?

OUMMIH: Well, I think if we wanted to be discouraged, we would have been a long time ago. I think one of the merits of the staff members of the United Nations is to have higher values than just strictly monetary compensation. Yes, if we want to think about that, I would agree with you. But the Member States have their own agenda and have their own programmes and plans. We do not get involved in that at that level. I think who really represents us is the Secretary-General, and we do seek his advice and his help or support in making sure that the Organization -- and here what I'm trying to say is that the Organization should be able to attract and retain the best.

MENON: Does it?

OUMMIH: I don't think it does at this moment, no.

LITTLEJOHNS: Why?

OUMMIH: Because the salaries that are offered are probably 20 to 30 per cent less than those offered in other organizations, for that matter, in ECC for --

LITTLEJOHNS: But here in the United States, Mr. Oummih, we're always hearing the criticism that United Nations Secretariat staff are overpaid, underworked, and so on, and that in fact salary scales are considerably higher than they are in the United States Civil Service. Is that untrue?

OUMMIH: Absolutely not, absolutely not. And, first of all, on the question of underworked, I would defy that, and I would ask anybody to come around and see. We have been working harder and harder over the last few years. Every staff member is basically doing two or three jobs because of the fact that many of us are going on missions. Now, when it comes to remuneration, we are not inventing anything. There is a system of pay, and the

International Civil Service Commission is in charge of making sure that that system is applied. Now, what is the system? It is the Noblemaire Principle. And the Noblemaire Principle based its remuneration on the United States Civil Service.

MENON: The Noblemaire Principle being that UN staff would be paid as much as the highest paid national civil service.

OUMMIH: National, which, for the last 30 to 40 years, has been the United States. Now, compared with the US, we are paid 20 per cent less than the US Civil Service. And if that is not enough, I think something is wrong.

LITTLEJOHNS: So why is this criticism constantly being put forward? I mean, if it's totally incorrect, can't the Staff Union do something to redress that situation?

OUMMIH: Well, I think there are a lot of things that are wrong in terms of perception. And I do think that as a Staff Union we should be doing something about it. Many people outside will say to you, "Do you pay taxes?" I mean, it's like we don't. We do.

LITTLEJOHNS: You pay a staff assessment.

OUMMIH: We pay a staff assessment which is probably more than we would have paid outside.

LITTLEJOHNS: That goes back to the Member States.

OUMMIH: Exactly. And "Do you have immunity?" We don't. There are lot of misperceptions.

MENON: Perhaps you might say that this is a misperception too, but one of the criticisms often made by governments is that there is a lot of waste, fraud and abuse within the Secretariat. How do you respond to that?

LITTLEJOHNS: Before you respond, this is World Chronicle. Our guest is Mohamed Oummih, President of the United Nations Staff Committee.

OUMMIH: I appreciate the question. The Staff Union has always called on the Organization, with all internal oversight auditors and everything, to make sure that any abuse is punished, any abuse is condemned. We do not condone any kind of abuse. To respond to your question, I don't think you can find anywhere in the world any organization of this size or even smaller where you would not find some kind of abuse. So, again, it's a perception. If in the United Nations there is one crisis or there is one case of fraud, automatically we assume there's a lot of fraud. We do not assume that when we talk about any other organization.

MENON: Yes, it's quite true. I mean, you remember the $3.9 million that was missing from the Somalia peace-keeping operation. And Scotland Yard sent a team to investigate, and while they were investigating it, $4 million was stolen from Scotland yard.

OUMMIH: Yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: Really?

OUMMIH: Yes. And that basically is an indication of how the perception is different from one area to another. And I don't think anyone knows what happened to Scotland Yard, but almost everybody knows what happened to the UN.

MORELLO: Within the Organization itself, or among the staff itself, the complaint is not always on the difference between salaries, say between the General Service and the Professional categories, so much as the perks that go with the Professional category but do not apply to somebody who's not necessarily not professional, but who is not classified as Professional, which would be a different thing. Have you done anything particular about such things as educational benefits, home leave? Is there any way of breaking through the barrier on that?

OUMMIH: I hope someday. Before becoming President, and even before becoming a member of the Staff Committee, I spent four or five years as Chairman of the Unified Structure Committee, and as such I gave a lot of my time and effort in that direction. Unfortunately, there is so much opposition from the Member States, from the International Civil Service Commission, that I am not optimistic any more that we can do anything. And also, the reasons come down to what Mr. Menon was mentioning before: money. Member States feel that the way they have it today costs them less than it would otherwise. And yet, as you mentioned yourself, everyone is professional in what they do. And I don't think this kind of discrimination or second class citizenship in the United Nations should have been tolerated to start with, in 1951 when it was decided. And if you ask the staff, General Service or Professional, this is one area that we really would like to see addressed.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Oummih, a lot of Americans, American nationals, United States nationals in the UN Secretariat do regard themselves as second class citizens in the system. For example, they don't get home leave. I mean, for example, somebody from Los Angeles does not have his or her fare paid back to Los Angeles on leave; they do not get education grants; they do not get a lot of the perks that non-US nationals in the Secretariat do receive. How do you account for that disparity, that discrimination? And what can be done about it?

OUMMIH: Well, first of all, I think the word "perks" is a little bit.... It is packages. Again, we go back to the system --

LITTLEJOHNS: Well, benefits anyway.

OUMMIH: Benefits. They are packages. But the Commission itself established the criteria under which those benefits or those packages are paid.

LITTLEJOHNS: Which commission? The Civil Service?

OUMMIH: The Civil Service Commission. And the United States is one country. The fact that it is a big country should not, in the view at least of the Commission, change anything to that. If the UN was in Russia or in China, the same thing would have happened there.

MENON: And Michael, also, if the American staff member is serving in Europe, of course he would get home leave to come to the United States.

OUMMIH: Right. So an American serving anywhere except the United States would be getting exactly the same benefit as someone who's come from China or Russia.

MENON: I want to ask you something else. The internal system of justice in the UN traditionally has not worked. People who are bad managers, who waste a lot of money of the Organization are never called to account. Staff members who make mistakes are never called to account. How would you see this system as changing?

OUMMIH: Well, as soon as I took office in February last year, that item was the first one on my agenda. And it so happened that the Secretary-General and the administration were also eager to see to it that the internal system of administration of justice is changed, is improved. And I am pleased to tell you that we have come a long way. We have in fact agreed on a conceptual plan for a new, improved administration of justice which will be implemented during this year and next year. And that plan is based on three main points. First of all, we will be calling more on informal resolution of disputes by the establishment of a panel of ombudsmen, which we did not have before. Secondly, the Joint Appeals Board that we used to have will be replaced by an arbitration board, which will be composed of professionals -- lawyers, professional jurists -- while keeping the jointness of the system. In other words, part of it would be -- one would be appointed by the staff, one by the administration, and the chairperson is basically the professional. So we have come a long way, and I hope that all these changes will make the justice system fairer, simpler and less costly.

MENON: But in your statement to the General Assembly didn't you say that the Administrative Tribunal, for instance, was a politicized body and should be merged with the ILO's board?

OUMMIH: Right. Well, yes. One doesn't exclude the other. What I'm saying here is that we have agreed that we will deal with the administration of justice up to the Tribunal. So the Tribunal question will come in a year, two years' time. And yes, I really think that the merger of the two tribunals would obviously be a savings for the Organization. And we would have the same jurisprudence for all matters. And the fact that the ILO tribunal is only composed of jurists gives the staff more confidence in going to that tribunal, and the judgements coming from that tribunal are more acceptable. Now, this Tribunal here in New York is composed of politicians. You have the Member States, who appoint or select their members, one of their delegations, to be on the Tribunal. And I don't think that is ....

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Oummih, you mentioned, earlier on, the consultative status of the Committee. Does that mean that the Secretary-General or the other policymakers consult you about key appointments in the UN? I mean, can you recommend people that you think should

be promoted to particular jobs in the higher echelon, below the rank of Assistant Secretary-General?

OUMMIH: Not at all. Not at all. I don't think the Staff Union has ever advocated, nor is interested in, co-management of the Organization. We are doing our job, and our job is to serve the Organization. The consultation process that I mentioned is for questions of policy which impact the staff members' working and living conditions. As far as promotions are concerned -- not for the political appointees, because they are at the discretion of the Secretary-General himself, but for all levels up to D1 -- we have appointment and promotion committees, the Appointment and Promotion Board; we do have our representative there. But in terms of appointments, they are at the discretion of the Secretary-General and his representatives.

MORELLO: One of the points of contention, at least as far as the Administrative and Budgetary Committee is concerned, has been the procedure for hiring and compensating what they call contractual personnel, international contractual personnel. One point they make is that something like over 50 per cent of those who come in under the contract are from four countries, and that those who are in charge -- the agencies in charge of hiring these people are also from the same region. What are the four countries? Would it be indiscreet to ask you that?

OUMMIH: I think everybody knows.

MORELLO: Well, I could guess, but I'd rather hear it from you.

OUMMIH: But I would not....

MORELLO: You would not.

OUMMIH: Let me just say one thing here. In my report to the Secretary-General and to the Staff Union, to the federation, this is one key element. And I'm not only looking at it from this point of view, but looking at it from another point of view, which is the discrimination, the possible discrimination against staff members, also against contractuals, who would be doing the same job but basically paid a different base salary depending on where they come from. And condoning that I found absolutely unacceptable, and I made that very clear to the Secretary-General.

MENON: Can you give me a yes or no answer if I ask you, is the UN well managed or not?

OUMMIH: Better managed, yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Oummih, I have to ask you about women in the UN. The Secretary-General promised that in this fiftieth anniversray year, 1995, he would have parity between men and women in the Secretariat in policy-making jobs. Is he going to be able to honor that promise?

OUMMIH: Well, my answer would be that you should ask the Secretary-General whether he would be, but everyone would agree at this point that it's not possible. And again, it's not lack of will on his part. But I think the ingredients are not there. On one hand --

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean there aren't enough qualified women?

OUMMIH: No, there are not enough qualified -- that's not what I'm saying. It's not only internal. In order to achieve that, you would have to have Member States, under-represented and non-represented Member States, proposing women. And they are not doing so. The Member States who are proposing are proposing more men than women. So the problem does not lie necessarily only with the Secretary-General and his administration. The second problem -- and this is where I think everyone would look at this question -- is that in order to increase by 20 per cent or 25 per cent the ratio of women at the high level jobs, you would have to freeze the promotion of men for a number of years. And I don't think even women would like to see that.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Oummih, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of World Chronicle.

OUMMIH: Thank you very much.

LITTLEJOHNS: Our guest has been Mohamed Oummih, President of the United Nations Staff Committee. He was interviewed by Ted Morello of the Far Eastern Economic Review and Bhaskar Menon of *The Times of India*. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of World Chronicle.

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